

Open Space

The City's open lands are a viable resource benefiting human health, the traditional wooded residential character of the community, and the natural environment.

Open space is commonly associated with fresh air, sun light and good health, leading many to the conclusion that a loss of open space represents an overall degradation of our environment. Recent losses of open space lands in the City of Fairfax have led to a heightened sensitivity to the need for open space throughout the community.

Over the past two hundred years, most of the lands that now comprise the City of Fairfax have become intensively developed for residential, commercial or other urban uses. During that same time, the importance of open space to the people of Fairfax has increased as open space lands became less common. With increasing demand for residential and commercial development, builders are now developing lands that they previously rejected. An important effect of this trend is the loss of privately owned vacant lands that have provided open space for many years without a cost to the City.

In addition to the actual loss of open space, the perceived need for open space has also grown over recent years. The City's growth in the late 1990s and in the first few years of the 21st century brought new types of higher-density housing development, further elevating existing concerns that the City should take action to preserve its remaining open space.

Open Space Functions

The term "open space" has different meanings to different people. Most of these meanings have in common the idea of lands that have not been intensively developed with structures. Common examples include forestlands, farmlands and parklands. While most people consider these lands to be natural areas, many lands that today serve as open space have been subject to deforestation, earthwork grading and replanting at some point in the past. Some of these lands have a small portion of their surfaces covered with buildings such as barns or picnic shelters while serving an overall open space function. While man-made intrusions such as ball fields and trails can occur on open space lands, most people believe that development more intensive than park facilities invalidates the land's status as open space.

Important to open space planning is the distinction between lands that have been formally designated as open space through official acts and lands that provide the benefits of open space despite having no guarantees that the open nature will be retained on a permanent basis. The development of previously open lands often upsets and confuses nearby residents who were unaware that the lands were privately held and eligible for development.

A purpose of open space planning and funding the purchase of lands for open space is to assure sufficient open space on a continuing basis by converting some privately held open lands into lands that are protected from development. Funding for the acquisition of open space was provided following an advisory referendum in 2000.

November 2000 Referendum

In response to the concern over the City's declining stock of open lands, City Council chose to add an advisory referendum to the November 2000 general election ballot. It read:

"Do you support the establishment of a dedicated fund in the City of Fairfax to purchase available land for the purpose of maintaining the land as open space or park land, with that fund provided through an increase of up to five cents in the real property tax rate for a period of not greater than five years?"

City of Fairfax voters approved the referendum by a margin of 5,925 to 3,184. The effect of the referendum's passage was that the City could take in an estimated 3 to 5 million dollars over the course of the five-year authorization to dedicate to open space preservation.

The passing of the referendum led City Council to establish a citizens' advisory committee to provide advice to City Council with regard to the anticipated open space acquisitions. The primary responsibility of the committee was to provide recommendations in the following areas:

1. Establishing criteria for the acquisition of open space parcels

2. Identifying parcels to be acquired
3. Identifying sources of outside funding that can be used to leverage tax funds

The Open Space Citizens' Advisory Committee (OSCAC) met beginning in late 2000 and produced a report dated March 2001. The most notable aspect of the report was the committee's analysis and selection of potential parcels for acquisition. Using a point-based ranking system, the committee evaluated the merits of 31 candidate parcels. The committee ranked the parcels in priority order based on a set of common goals at which the committee arrived through consensus-building discussions. The ranked list of parcels receiving votes was a prominent part of the OSCAC report.

The Advisory Committee also included in its report letters submitted by other citizen groups such as the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board and Historic Fairfax, Inc. Additionally reported were the open space preferences of citizens who spoke at the Committee's public meetings, often on behalf of citizen organizations. While there was much overlap between these lists and that of the Advisory Committee, the priority weightings were often quite different.

One point that the Open Space Citizen's Advisory Committee was careful to make, echoing the City Council proclamation, was that whatever the specific dollar amount raised during the five year period, it should be spent wisely and augmented wherever possible with the use of grants, donations, easements and other means of stretching the purchasing power of the authorized money. Future efforts to acquire land for open space should keep this recommendation in mind.

In 2002 the City began the process of acquiring several of the tracts recommended by the Advisory Committee. The first tracts announced by City Council for acquisition were the Stafford East tract, Rebel Run, the Providence Park tract, a trail easement across the Cantone property, and a portion of the Mosby Road tract.



Vest pocket park on Ranger Road.

Existing Inventory and Priority Needs

The City has a large park system that is augmented by public school lands, homeowners' association properties, and other privately held open spaces. Combined, these spaces serve to provide recreational areas for citizens and areas residents, protect neighborhoods from incompatible uses, and preserve the City's most sensitive natural features. Additional purchases of open space should further these ends, providing additional benefit to the community. Ideally, the lands chosen to augment the City's existing inventory should provide the maximum benefit possible to the City as a whole. The purchase of parcels that can provide commonly enjoyed resources, such as ball fields, streambeds and historic sites should receive top priority. Such widely beneficial purchases will serve the public better than the purchase of lands with impacts restricted to the immediate area. City staff and officials should be cautious to weigh the benefits of a land purchase as either benefiting the entire City or satisfying the residents of an underserved area.

In addition to attempting to purchase lands of demonstrable citywide benefit, the parcel selection process must address the needs of the many special interest groups that will attempt to affect the decision. Among the groups that have a vested interest in the acquisition of open space are sports leagues, neighborhoods, environmental groups and historic preservation advocates. All of these groups have valid reasons to promote particular open space acquisition policies. While it is impossible to fully meet the needs of each of these groups, it is possible to strategically select a group of parcels that together serve to promote the goals of each group and the City as a whole.

Open Space and Future Land Use Designations

The Land Use Plan describes the three main categories of Future Land Use for designation as open space. The three categories are Open Space—Recreation, Open Space—Conservation, and Open Space—Preservation. The primary differences among these categories are the purposes for open space designation. The Recreation category includes all lands used primarily for active recreation. The Conservation category includes primarily lands used for visual buffering and passive recreation. The Preservation category is reserved for lands that the City plans to keep—to the extent possible—in a natural state. These categories cover lands that both are currently in open space use as well as those lands that are desired for addition to the City's open space inventory. The characteristics of these designations can be

seen in the Land Use chapter. The locations of lands designated for these uses can be seen in Map OS-1 and in the map accompanying the Comprehensive Plan.

Open Space— Goal, Objectives & Strategies

Goal: Ensure, on a continuing basis, the provision of adequate open space for health, recreation, and environmental purposes.

Objective OS-1 Acquire lands, development rights, or conservation easements as necessary to ensure adequate locations to support recreational activities.

Strategies

OS-1.1 Target lands for purchase based on input received in meetings of the Open Space Citizens' Advisory Committee, City organizations and citizen input.

The Open Space Citizens' Advisory Committee provided in its report a priority ranking list and correspondence from boards, commissions, civic associations and City residents. City Council began the process of acquiring the collection of properties that it considered would best provide for the City's additional open space needs, based on that report. If any of the planned open space purchases are not completed, the City should look again to the report for additional guidance.

OS-1.2 Assure the provision of lands for each of the types of open space, focusing on creating the maximum benefit to City residents.

Among the possible intended uses for open space are active recreation, public spaces, buffers between residential neighborhoods and adjacent incompatible uses, and natural area preservation. While all of these objectives are valid uses of open space funding, care should be taken to ensure that neither one of these goals, nor any of the groups that advances a particular goal, dominates the open space acquisition process.

Objective OS-2 Attain maximum value in providing for the City's open space needs.

Strategies

OS-2.1 Utilize outside funding, donations and grants to maximize the effect of the funds generated through the property tax increase endorsed in 2000.

While the approved five-year tax increase will raise an amount of money sufficient to buy a substantial amount of land, the impact of these funds could be greatly enhanced if that money were augmented by additional funds awarded through federal, state and nonprofit programs. The Open Space Citizens' Advisory Committee Report gave several examples of these types of funding. The City should seek additional sources to assist in large purchases.

OS-2.2 Engage in negotiations, arbitration and other processes to ensure that the City pays a fair price to obtain lands or gain land use restrictions.

In order to maximize the purchasing power of the money raised through the short-term property tax increase, the City should be vigilant to avoid paying inflated prices for desired parcels. Differences with landowners over price should be referred to third party facilitators whenever possible.

OS-2.3 Wherever appropriate, obtain conservation easements and similar instruments on lands that the City will not actively utilize.

The use of conservation easements can bring desired lands into official open space status without requiring the City to buy the properties outright. Extensive use of conservation easements can have the effect of maximizing the impact of the funds raised for open space procurement while not increasing the City's landholdings. Such a procedure should save on the costs of maintaining these lands, most of which would be kept in their natural state.

Objective OS-3 Obtain or otherwise gain designation of small parcels for use as vest pocket parks as public gathering spaces, open space buffers or neighborhood passive recreation areas.

Strategies

OS-3.1 Wherever appropriate, convert excess rights-of-way and other City-owned properties to open space.

The City has long held rights-of-way, buffer strips and other vacant lands for their open space value on an informal basis. The City should undertake a study to identify all of these lands and act to formally designate them as open space.

OS-3.2 Facilitate the creation of vest pocket parks in areas of high pedestrian traffic or visual interest.

One manner of enhancing the City's mixed-use areas, particularly Old Town and the three major nodes along the Lee Highway corridor, is to create vest-pocket parks. These parks can serve two major functions: adding green space to relieve the congesting effects of intensive development and providing places for people to relax or visit near areas of employment or shopping. When possible, the City should encourage the inclusion of vest pocket parks during the processes of reviewing plans involving the redevelopment of focal areas within the City.